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AUTHOR	Burkhart, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

This report discusses St. Petersburg College's (SPC) (Florida) evaluation question, "How can St. Petersburg College leverage technology to increase access to courses and programs for an expanded pool of learners?" The report summarizes both nationwide/worldwide best practices and current SPC efforts related to four strategies: (1) an E-learning expansion; (2) individual initiatives; (3) collaborative efforts; and (4) retention. With respect to planning an e-learning expansion, national models were drawn from the business community and institutional assessment literature. Current SPC initiatives include the creation and distribution of the Technology Plan, the Electronic Campus Plan, and the Distance Education Master Plan. The Individual Initiatives section of the report identifies five unique strategies for increasing e-learning access that can serve as national models, along with 10 SPC recent e-learning innovations. The Collaborative Efforts section describes seven potential sources of partnerships (e.g., governmental agencies, schools of all levels, and the military) and current SPC collaborative projects. The discussion of retention initiatives outlines national models for the retention of e-learners and notes SPC's lack of a formal retention improvement plan. The report concludes with recommendations specific to SPC for each of the e-learning strategies addressed in the report. (RC)

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Benchmarking St. Petersburg College:
A Report to Leadership

Project Eagle Evaluation Question #4
http://www.spjc.edu/eagle/PEEQ4.htm

ED 469 512

How Can St. Petersburg College Leverage Technology to Increase Access to Courses and Programs for An Expanded Pool of Learners?

Submitted by
Joyce Burkhart
Coordinator, Research, Evaluation and Dissemination
Project Eagle
December 30, 2001

Introduction

To formulate an evaluation process of e-learning practices at St. Petersburg College (SPC) for Project Eagle, external evaluator Dr Gordon "Spud" Van de Water, Education Commission of the States, suggested that the college first identify critical issues. Dr. James Olliver, Project Eagle director, with the help of the Project Eagle Work Group, formulated six questions, which were then worked into an evaluation plan by Dr. Van de Water and Joyce Burkhart, Coordinator of Research, Evaluation and Dissemination.

The decision was made to consider one question per quarter for the next 18 months, taking the following steps:

1. First, examine best e-learning practices related to that question, both nationwide and worldwide, using the Web as the primary source of information. The results of this external evaluation would be published in an issue of Project Eagle's monthly newsletter, *Best Educational E-Practices* (BEEP).

2. Next, compile a list of all practices related to the question currently in use at SPC, using a variety of appropriate techniques and strategies.

3. Compare the best external practices with those offered at SPC.

4. Benchmark SPC and submit a report to the college leadership on the college's performance in the area under consideration.

5. Finally, disseminate the results nationally, using the Project Eagle Web site and other forms of information distribution.

This report represents Step 4, incorporating the results of Steps 1-3.

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Background

The fourth question to be evaluated dealt with ways to expand access to courses and programs through the use of technology. In July 2001, research was completed to compile a list of ideas nationwide for such expansion. In August 2001, the results were published in *Best Educational E-Practices* (BEEP), Number 11, "Broadening the Base of E-Learners." The methods suggested for accomplishment fell into four categories:

A. Planning an E-Learning Expansion

B. Individual Initiatives

C. Collaborative Efforts

D. Retention

From November to the middle of December 2001,* steps were taken to determine what SPC has done to increase access. These steps included the following:

1. Examination of current methods of increasing access to eCampus, University Partnership Center (UPC), and specialized SPC programs.

2. Dialog with selected administrators, faculty, and learners.

3. Contact with departments working with special populations.

In December 2001 external and internal results were compared and compiled in this report. An executive summary appears in *Best Educational E-Practices* (BEEP), Issue 16, January 1, 2002.

Completion of this report was originally scheduled for November 30, 2001, but postponement of the previous Project Eagle Evaluation Question has pushed back the publication of the remaining reports by one month.

Results

A. Planning an E-Learning Expansion

Nationwide/worldwide. In a number of studies and articles, the need for careful planning before embarking on an expansion of e-learning programs was stressed. Three different approaches that could be useful in the planning stages follow:

1. Ideas for higher education that can be transferred from the business community emerged in "Lessons for Higher Education from the Dot Coms" by Chris Brezil in Educause Quarterly 23 (4), 2000:

a. Have a business plan that makes sense. It need not be formal, but should include a review of the soundness of the approach and the goals to be achieved.
b. Focus on your expertise. Consider an institution's long-term goals and incorporate them into your online strategy. Stay within your institution's realm of experience and know you customer in order to build a platform for later expansion into new opportunities.
c. Don't underestimate the costs. Cutting corners in the wrong places can have immediate and long-term negative consequences. Look for ways to save on labor by using current staff as much as possible, and shop for around for quality software that is sometimes free.
d. Don't focus just on price. Instead, develop a complete consumer package that includes a quality experience.
e. Remember that your people are your finest assets. Train the employees you already have when possible, because of the experience, commitment and common sense that they possess.

2. Eight areas to assess for an institution's preparedness were offered in "Prepare Your Campus for E-Business" by Jill Kidwell, John Mattie and Michael Sousa of PricewaterhouseCoopers in *Educause Quarterly* 23 (2) 2000:

a. Does the strategy address the emerging environment?
b. What are the available skills?
c. Do the processes support the strategy?
d. How is performance measured?
e. Does the infrastructure support the business?
f. Can we deliver?
g. What are the tax and legal issues?
h. What is our competence in security?

Such an assessment determines where an institution is and isn't ready for e-business. Knowing this enables the development of a strong strategic plan for e-business and a corresponding implementation plan.

3. A multi-step model for planning e-learning was developed by Hezel Associates and published in "Strategic Planning in E-Learning Collaborations: A Recipe for Optimizing Success" by Richard T. Hezel and Paula Szulc Dominguez in *Education at a Distance* 15 (40), April 2001:

a. Gather and analyze targeted information about e-learning programs and services.
b. Perform a needs assessment and market analysis of potential users in order to understand their programmatic interests and motivations.
c. Conduct a feasibility study.
d. Develop an e-learning business case for the organization.
e. Prepare a mission and goals that align with the organization's institutional mission and culture.
f. Create and nurture collaborative relationships among the departments, agencies, business, and individuals that will be key participants.
g. Have a technical expert compose a technical feasibility study, design the system, and plan for the rollout.
h. Identify sources for sustainable funding.
i. Articulate strategies to reach identified markets.
j. Devise an evaluation plan to assess the system's management and outcomes in terms of costs and effectiveness.
k. Implement a system to engage, support and train faculty members in order to expand the content and programs offered.
l. Create and deliver student support services, with an eye toward limiting student attrition.
m. Unfold the e-learning program through phased installation with a pilot test of the services and system.
n. Using the evaluation data gathered, let the planning process generate recommendations for improving the e-learning initiative.
o. Incorporate those recommendations into the full-scale rollout.

SPC. The college has produced a number of planning documents, both before and during the development of its distance learning program.

1. **Technology Plan**. In 1999, SPC released its Information Technology Plan 1999-2001, a 72-page, comprehensive report that included an analysis of the present state of technology at the institution at that time, as well as future needs and strategic plans for dealing with them. Specific areas covered were ongoing technology upgrades, IT departmental organization, training, disaster preparation, the Y2K problem, data and video networking, and software licensing,

At the time of the report, the college was preparing for an accreditation review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). As part of that preparation, an Exploring Digital and Global Education (EDGE) steering committee was formed to design an assessment and planning process for future technology needs related to the impact of communications technology. Among the many documents it produced was a Strategic Planning Model for developing and assessing institutional directions and objectives.

2. **Electronic Campus Plan.** In October 1999 "A Plan for the New SPJC Electronic Campus" was completed. It outlined the methods that would be used to expand the use of instructional technology in classes offered by the college's newly created eCampus. With funds provided by the Project Eagle grant, the intention was to develop and implement new A. S. and certificate programs; create a complete AA degree through online or other video or Web-based delivery methods; allow flexibility and increase access through e-learning opportunities; and create targeted online workforce programs.

The number of programs and types of courses offered were determined by the Provosts' Council and the President's Cabinet consistent with college goals and objectives. The eCampus director coordinated decisions about when to offer the courses. A schedule of dates for completion of other initiatives related to the delivery of e-learning services was also determined.

3. **Distance Education Master Plan.** In early 2000 SPC's eCampus produced the comprehensive "Plan for Distance Education at St. Petersburg Junior College" (not online). The previously mentioned electronic campus plan was only one part of this document, which included sections on the nature and scope of programs; ensuring program quality; student services to support distance education; access to resources; faculty issues; and organizational structure.

The plan contained organizational charts, forms, and guidelines, including the distance education "must statements" issued by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), for various aspects of e-learning development. It was designed to be used from the 1999-2000 through 2003-2004 school years.

B. Individual Initiatives

Nationwide/worldwide. Beyond the usual transfer of traditional courses already offered by institutions to an e-learning format, some schools came up with unique ideas for increasing numbers, offerings and access:

1. A complete degree at home. Sam Houston State University (TX), for example, offers online a full Master of Arts degree in Military History and Master of Education degree in Reading.

2. A virtual lecture hall. Developed by the University of South Florida, this service was designed to reach the desktops of individuals unable to attend lectures, using streaming audio and video and IP multicast technologies.

3. Online courses in unusual subjects. John A. Logan College (IL) works with thirteen other Illinois colleges and offers noncredit courses like the history of the Beatles or UFO's.

4. A personalized virtual room for incoming first-year students. The University of Dayton allows students to connect with the university community online months before they begin their studies. This service takes advantage of the energy and enthusiasm recent high-school graduate have toward their college experience long before they come to campus.

5. A "let the college come to you" approach in a variety of formats. Rio Salado College (AZ) not offers a complete associate degree by using the Internet (including CD-ROM), audio and videocassettes, and print-based materials. The school also provides a variety of specialized courses, including a law enforcement technology program for police officers across the United States, a professional development program for K-12 teachers entirely online for Arizona credentialing, and a dental assisting program.

SPC. Even before the college received its Project Eagle funding, SPC had undertaken a number of unique e-learning initiatives. It offered the first Veterinary Technology A. S. degree online, as well as the capability of getting an A. A. degree entirely through telecourses. Recent innovations have included:

1. The development of teleweb courses that combine televised and online instruction.

2. The capability of getting an A. A. degree entirely online by Fall 2002, when the college's last required course - Speech - will be offered.

3. The creation of a full-time CyberAdvisor position to assist students electronically.

4. A series of "laptop classes" that combines on-campus attendance with online textbooks. Assignments and other class materials are also all Web-based.

5. Fully online A. S. programs in Medical Laboratory Technology and, in the near future, Fire Science.

6. Fully online certificate programs in Emergency Administration and Management and, in the near future, Fire Science.

7. A growing number of online courses under construction that will eventually allow online completion of other certificate and A. S. programs.

8. The use of state-of-the-art video distribution and control equipment to support multi-point, interactive classes.

9. A marketing campaign that included a press release kit sent in October to major newspapers and other publications, local and nationwide.

10. An online video clip and model course (near completion) that allows students to experience e-learning.

C. Collaborative Efforts

Nationwide/worldwide. Many institutions have collaborated with outside agencies in order to broaden their base of e-learners. Some possible combinations follow:

1. Collaboration with other schools in the same system. The University of Minnesota-Crookston, example, has contracted with the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities to offer a series of courses for majors in scientific technical communication, which Crookston cannot otherwise provide. The first school provides all general academic requirements, and the partner provides some or all of the major courses via e-learning. To make it work smoothly requires careful planning and administration.

2. Collaboration between schools at different levels. Franklin University in Ohio is but one example of an institution that has attempted to enroll community-college graduates in its online programs by forging partnerships. Franklin has developed such an alliance, which allows students to shift seamlessly from local colleges to its virtual campus, with more than 90 community colleges in the United States and Canada.

3. Collaboration among states, regions, and countries to form virtual campuses. A number of states have created Web sites that provide one-stop shopping for information about the courses and programs available in those geographic areas. States like Pennsylvania have gone a step further by forming a consortium that will allow state residents to take courses from its member community colleges using Internet and video technology.

4. Collaboration regulated by governmental agencies. Canada is an example of a country that has called for provincial governments to take steps to foster online learning, with areas of concern carefully identified and a council appointed to manage the effort.

5. Participation in a program with the military. The United States Army has built a portal for online education with more than twenty institutions. This ambitious project is expected to expand to include 80,000 soldier-learners within five years.

6. Collaboration to attract a specific market. Yale, Stanford and the University of Oxford, England, have launched a joint effort to offer online courses to their alumni.

7. International collaboration. More and more colleges and universities are forming alliances with

schools outside the United States to offer online specific degree programs. One example is Oakland University's (MI) MBA program for students in Lebanon.

SPC. Presently the college is involved in collaboration of several different kinds:

1. Collaboration with other colleges and universities. SPC, through its University Partnership Center, has formed alliances with twelve other colleges and universities: University of South Florida, University of Florida, Florida State University, Embry-Riddle, University of Central Florida, Florida International University, Florida A & M, Saint Leo College, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida Institute of Technology and George Washington University.

Bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees are offered, and general subject areas included business, education, nursing, information technology, engineering, computer science, information studies, hospitality, aeronautics, pharmacy, health services, and the social sciences. An increasing number of these degrees combine traditional and electronic learning, and Project Eagle funds have been allocated for the development of more online courses by UPC faculty involved in these programs.

2. State and regional collaboration. SPC participates in the following:

a. Southern Regional Education Board Electronic Campus (SREB). The *Electronic Campus* of the Southern Regional Education Board is an "electronic marketplace" for courses, programs and services. All courses and programs are offered by accredited colleges and universities in the participating states and meet the *Principles of Good Practice* developed by the *Electronic Campus*.

b. Florida Virtual Campus. The mission of Florida Virtual Campus is to assist Florida postsecondary institutions in providing affordable access to learning opportunities and services by creating a cooperative atmosphere that will lead to a seamless distance learning experience for students.

c. Florida Community College Distance Learning Consortium. Established in 1996, its purpose is to coordinate the establishment of a technology-enhanced community college delivery system that supports the mission of the community colleges and ensures maximum access to higher education for all Florida residents by utilizing instructional technology and eliminating the barriers of distance, time, and place.

d. LINCC. This Web site is provided by the state of Florida for the use of all community college students. It includes an online catalog of materials, plus electronic resources in the form of journals, newspapers, books and more.

e. FACTS.org. The Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) Web site allows students access to their academic records, find sources of information for managing their academic activities, apply for admission to various Florida public institutions, plan their careers, and much more.

g. eChoices. This commercial service provides Florida students comprehensive and easy-to-use databases for occupations, colleges, and financial aid resources.

D. Retention

Nationwide/worldwide. One of the most important, yet frequently overlooked, aspects of expanding the number of e-learners is retaining those who have already enrolled for an e-course and motivating them to continue their education in that format. There are several ways of accomplishing this:

1. Constant communication. The need both to communicate with and engage students in online courses is essential to a successful e-learning experience. "Good Connections: Strategies to Maximize Student Engagement" by Mary I. Dereshiwsky and Eugene R. Moan in *Education at a Distance* 14 (11), November 2000, provides a timetable for institutions and individual instructors to connect with online students. It includes unique concepts like welcome letters to first-time online students, a semi-weekly newsletter and a monthly student self-report on accomplishments and problems.

2. "Student Support Online Through Thoughtful Course Design." In a 2000 paper by Cheryl White of Grant MacEwan College (Canada), the author reports on the results of a study of e-student experiences. Based on those results, she suggests incorporating ongoing assistance to students through techniques like these:

a. an FAQ page on the same Web page as an assignment,

b. brief examples of completed assignments,
c. assignment criteria sheets that take the mystery out of evaluation,
d. instructor preferences for assignment formats,
e. a discussion activity that allows students to indicate the type of hardware and software they are using,
f. an automatic message confirming receipt of questions or assignments,
g. an announcement from the instructor of how often and when he/she will check the course,
h. "print-friendly" course content options formatted to be easily readable when printed.

3. Other solutions. In "The e-Learning Taboo: High Dropout Rates in Online Courses," an article (not available online) by Karen Frankola in *Syllabus*, June 2000, the author focuses on the need for a well-designed course, an experienced, trained, and engaging instructor, a high level of technical support, and a detailed pre-course orientation. Most important, however are high interactivity with faculty and other students, as well as good managerial oversight.

4. Online mentoring support. Florida State University is an example of a school that provides tutorial guidance and help via a mentor who acts as intermediary between e-structor and e-student.

SPC. Like most of the other institutions surveyed, the college has had no formal plan for improving retention of its online students and collected no meaningful statistics. Recently, as part of a University Partnership Center program in higher education, a group working with SPC's Administrative Information Systems (AIS) department has begun collection of retention data. That department is also developing a new system (GoFar) that will facilitate data collection using existing student records. In addition, the eCampus has been working independently with Project Eagle funds to explore the demographics of its e-students.

However, even without hard data, eCampus administration has taken a number of steps to ease the path for its e-learners. Its well-designed Web site includes links to a self-assessment tools for those considering an e-course, a guide to registration, the e-course catalog, the college's full-time CyberAdvisor, frequently asked questions, technical information and more. It also publishes its own catalog of courses, which contains all same information available at its Web site.

In addition, WebCT has been the course management software chosen by SPC for all its online classes, a decision that provides a consistent online learning environment, no matter how many e-courses a student takes. The eCampus WebCT opening page offers students tutorials in the use of the software, as well as a link to the company's Website and online assistance for logging into a course.

Faculty who wish to teach online take comprehensive training in the form of an Electronic Learning Journey developed by the Instructional Technology department before they begin.

A great deal of responsibility for retaining e-learners falls on individual faculty members, and a poll of those shows a variety of techniques that they have employed to increase the success and satisfaction of those enrolled in their classes:

a. group projects involving two-four students, preferably with students selecting the group.
b. "cyber-activities" that require use of Web-based sources related to the subject of the class.
c. messages posted by students about themselves on the discussion board.
d. responses to student emails as soon as possible.
e. a buddy system for online work - each student picks another to work with.
f. a question of the day for extra credit.
g. effective use of the chat function.
h. student assistants who offer tutoring services both in chat rooms and individually.
i. telephone calls whenever needed.
j. completion of an online orientation to the courses, possibly followed by a quiz.
k. posting of student assignments to the Web page and allowing response.

Above all, SPC faculty, like their counterparts nationwide, stress the need for communication and fostering a sense of involvement in online classes. The college's Instructional Technology Advisory Group (ITAG) made a

formal recommendation at its November meeting that online instructors be expected to respond to student communication in less than 24 hours, five days a week.

Review and Recommendations

Student enrollment in the college's eCampus has risen dramatically in the two years since it was officially created. In the fall of 1909, 619 students were taking online courses. That number increased to 1152 in the fall of 2000 and 2911 in the fall of 2001. From those statistics alone, it is evident that SPC has already achieved considerable success in expanding its pool of e-learners. Looking at the four key areas needed to increase access identified in this report, this is where the college stands:

A. **Planning.** SPC has a long history of careful planning before new ventures are begun. Within the Technology Plan, the Electronic Campus Plan, and the Distance Education Master Plan, it is possible to find most, if not all, of the issues identified nationally as critical to the successful development of an e-learning initiative or expansion. These plans also provide valuable background information for new staff members and faculty who are working with eCampus management, development, or course delivery.

B. **Individual Initiatives.** Project Eagle has enabled the college to accelerate the speed at which it has developed e-learning opportunities unique to SPC. Laptop classes and complete online programs in areas like veterinary technology, medical laboratory technology and emergency management are among the few, if not the only, of their kind in the country.

One critical initiative that has proven elusive is the ability for a student to complete an application for admission online. Getting the college's required speech course online has been another, and is one that needs to be accomplished for the college to reach its goal of offering an A. A. degree entirely online before the conclusion of Project Eagle in 2003. In spite of this, students can still obtain the degree by distance if they take speech as a telecourse. It is worth noting that even before the start of Project Eagle, the college offered a complete A. A. degree telecourse program.

SPC is fortunate to have an administration that is not only open to but also looking for new programs and new ways to offer them. The college's recent change in status from a two-year to a four-year institution is an example of this attitude. By the fall of 2002, SPC will become the first community college in Florida to offer bachelor's degrees, and will do so in education, nursing and some technology fields. Although this effort is in its infancy, there is little doubt that e-learning will be part of it, thereby increasing access to education for an even larger pool of learners.

C. **Collaborative efforts.** SPC's University Partnership Center is one of the largest of such ventures in the country. As with the development of the college's new baccalaureate offerings, e-learning plays an ever larger part, as new courses are created and new programs added. There is no doubt that this kind of collaboration has been a successful means of expansion.

In addition, SPC has played an active, sometimes pivotal, part in all the state and regional activities enumerated in this report. Like the college, Florida has long been a leader in finding innovative methods of delivering information electronically to the state's students at all levels. Efforts like LINCC, FACTS, and eChoices demonstrate the commitment by the state legislature to underwrite online ventures that provide access to everyone.

One area of possible collaboration that is growing nationwide, but has not yet been tried by SPC, is joint arrangements with the military or other agencies, private or public, to offer online courses and programs. Partnership with a major player outside the academic world would enlarge the potential student base tremendously without expensive marketing efforts.

D. **Retention.** Until SPC makes collection of data on e-student retention routine, it is difficult and impractical to get a reading of how well the college is doing in keeping students once they enroll in e-courses. Some preliminary studies have begun, but effective use of newly developed tools is in its infancy. This information is vital to get a true picture of student success or lack thereof, and the absence of such is curious in an institution that is otherwise so committed to offering the best in e-learning.

Even with only preliminary statistics to prove it, the eCampus recognizes the increased need for e-learners to receive support and communication that will insure their success. The eCampus Web site is exemplary in the inclusion of information that a student might need, and the creation of a full-time CyberAdvisor position reflects college's commitment to satisfying its e-clientele.

From responses to a number of informal surveys of the college's online faculty, it is fair to say that much of the visible success of the college's distance programs can be attributed to them. Those who choose to teach online are an unusually dedicated and innovative group. The online discussion board that they have formed provides a glimpse of lively, creative folks who truly enjoy the pioneer status they have, even with its difficulties.

Faculty are well supported by an Instructional Technology department that strives to assist them, whether by its Electronic Learning Journey (ELJ) training program or the one-on-one e-course development assistance provided by instructional technologists and technical design specialists. The college's Help Desk does an exemplary effort to provide the technical support needed by both faculty and students.

As the eCampus continues to grow, it may be prudent for the college to investigate the idea of a monitoring program that would involve an intermediary of some kind between instructor and students to handle the more mundane, often not content-related, aspects of course management. It might require no more than a student assistant, but other schools have found that the retention and success rate of online students improves when there is someone like this assisting in course delivery.

Overall, SPC's attitude toward increasing access and expanding its pool of learners is an extremely proactive one. If the momentum for innovation continues after the funding provided by Project Eagle ends, the future of the college in the e-learning field looks bright.

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